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Canada

Speech for the
Minister of Justice and Attorney General of Canada,
Vic Toews, Q.C.

Canadian Professional Police Association

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Thank you, Mr. President, for your kind introduction. And I would also like to thank Prime Minister Stephen Harper for his remarks here today. I have worked closely with the Prime Minister on justice and security issues. I know the appreciation he has for the work of front line police officers across the country, and I'm confident that he will continue to make support for Canada's police a top priority in his new government.

I. Introduction

I wish to thank the executive members of the Canadian Professional Police Association for inviting me to speak at your annual board meeting. These events provide us with an opportunity to share our vision of a safer, healthier Canadian society, and allow us to share our thoughts on the best strategies for making that vision a reality.

And when it comes to issues of safety and responding to the needs of Canadians, I believe that no voices are more compelling than those of Canada's police officers. It is clear that you care deeply about the well-being of Canadians: every day, across this country, you put your lives on the line to protect others. I receive many requests to speak from many organizations, but I'm proud to say that my first public speech as Minister of Justice is being delivered to the Canadian Professional Police Association.

My party has always appreciated the efforts made by the CPPA to advance your priority issues, such as a national drug strategy, a Police Officers' Bill of Rights, and improvements to Canada's corrections and parole systems. Today I'd like to discuss some of our new government's priorities for strengthening our justice system. I am confident that as we make progress on them, they will result in meaningful reforms that will mean everyone—particularly the most vulnerable members of society—can feel safe and secure in their communities.

The Government of Canada has been clear and consistent in outlining its plan to address five key priorities on behalf of Canadians. Those five priorities are: passing the *Federal Accountability Act*, cutting the GST, making our communities safer, helping parents with the cost of raising children, and establishing a Patient Wait Times Guarantee.

The Minister of Public Safety, Stockwell Day, and I as Minister of Justice and Attorney General of Canada, will share the important responsibility to deliver on the Government of Canada's priority of making our streets and communities safer by cracking down on crime.

This is no easy task and the police understand this better than anyone. But it can be done, and it

will be done. Today, I would like to briefly highlight some of the areas we must address to make this vision a reality.

II. Getting Tough on Gun Crime

If we are going to succeed in making our streets and communities safer, we must address the growing problem of gun crime—particularly in our cities. Canadians want and need to feel safe as they go about their daily business. We consider safety and security to be fundamental to Canada's social and economic well-being. But prominent instances of violent gun crime, in communities large and small and in every part of the country, have sent us all a clear and tragic message that we cannot take the safety of our citizens for granted. Gun crime exists in this country; the danger is real.

I believe the issue of gun crime has now become a priority concern of Canadians, and the time has come for us to toughen our approach to combating this growing danger. Violent offenders and other serious offenders deserve more than a slap on the wrist. As an overarching principle, I believe that serious offences should be met with serious consequences, and we are developing ways to strengthen sentences for those who commit gun crime. As the Mayerthorpe tragedy illustrated all too well, those who have a predilection to violent crime should not be loose in our society. We must learn from these terrible incidents and—with strengthened resolve—ensure that they never happen again.

Getting tough on violent crime serves as both a means and a message: it proclaims that we believe in a peaceful society—a society that does not tolerate acts of violence. It also serves to protect us from those violent offenders who might otherwise be sent back to the community to commit another act of violence. Many provinces and stakeholders—including this organization—have endorsed this kind of approach and the Government of Canada has an abiding interest in advancing these types of criminal justice reforms as we move to improve public safety.

III. Law Enforcement and Public Safety

In addition to pursuing law reform initiatives, a second key component to increasing public safety is to ensure that we have enough police officers to effectively enforce our laws.

According to Department of Public Safety documents, there is currently a shortage of some 1,000 RCMP officers in federal, provincial, and municipal policing roles. In addition, many provincial and municipal police forces are under-funded and overstretched. Of course, the CPPA has been fighting for increases in front-line policing for quite some time.

I believe in the principle that having more police on our streets makes our streets safer. I have always endorsed this approach to community safety and will continue to advocate on your behalf with my Cabinet colleagues and in Parliament. This Government has listened—and will continue to listen—to the CPPA and to work closely with you to help grow Canada's police forces because we recognize the invaluable role of the police as the front-line defenders of justice.

IV. National Drug Strategy

I note that another priority area for the CPPA is the issue of a new National Drug Strategy. As police officers, you know that the last thing Canada needs is more illegal drugs on our streets. The number of marijuana grow-operations has increased dramatically, as has the production and distribution of drugs such as crack cocaine, crystal meth, and ecstasy.

I agree that Canada should re-examine its strategy for dealing with this serious issue. I also realize that there are no easy solutions: this is a complex problem that will require complex solutions. We need to consider a multi-faceted approach that will include changes to prison sentences and fines, as well as programs to help young people stay drug-free. We will also need to

work closely with other departments—such as Health Canada and Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness, with the provinces and territories, with community organizations, and with our police forces. Together, I am confident that we can reduce drug use in our country, and create a healthier future for our young people.

V. Stronger Correctional Services

In addition to these law reform and law enforcement initiatives, another important public safety issue is to ensure that we have effective correctional services.

This might involve providing new facilities, but it also involves examining the programs we now have in place for inmates, and finding the best ways to integrate inmates back into the community so that we reduce the risk of violent re-offending.

I believe that it is time to get tough when it comes to incarcerating violent offenders, and I applaud the efforts that have been made to put an end to what has been referred to as "Club Fed." All too often, we see violent offenders moved to minimum secure facilities before serving a significant portion of their sentence. Whenever this issue comes up, I am reminded of Sudbury Constable Joe MacDonald. The man who murdered Constable MacDonald was moved to a minimum security facility after serving only six years of his life sentence for first-degree murder. I know that Constable MacDonald's story is a painful one for some of you in this room, so I won't dwell on it. But we must acknowledge that there is a problem in the system, and look for ways to resolve it.

Once again, this is an area where the CPPA has put forth thoughtful recommendations, advocating strong changes to the Criminal Code; thorough examinations of sentencing, corrections and parole systems; and greater involvement of victims. In this regard, during the election, our new government committed itself to ending the availability of conditional sentences – more commonly known as "house arrest" – for serious crimes. This is a commitment that we intend to fulfill.

I know that my colleague, Minister Day, has also taken these issues to heart and will be working hard in Parliament to bring about positive reforms. As always, your opinions and expertise are greatly valued and I wish to thank you for your perspectives on this matter.

VI. Investing in Crime Prevention

The final component of community safety that I wish to discuss with you is crime prevention. Our government, as I have discussed, is focused on cracking down on the pressing issues of gun crime, criminal gangs, and drugs. We intend to ensure that serious crime means serious time.

But we intend as well to increase community safety by preventing crime before it occurs. We will address root causes of crime by supporting communities and families with effective social programs and sound economic policies. We will help young people resist the lure of gangs, drugs, and guns, and help them to stand firmly against the factors that place them at risk of coming into contact with the criminal justice system.

VII. Conclusion

In closing, I wish to reiterate my commitment to consult with you and with police forces throughout the country on matters related to law enforcement and community safety. You are experts on these matters and your opinions are important to me and to my colleagues at the Department of Justice.

I noted that, a few years ago, under the CPPA 2002 Resolutions, a request was made that all Supreme Court appointments be approved by a Committee of Parliament. I was delighted to recently take part in the appointment of a new Supreme Court Justice for which we used a

selection process that was unprecedented in its openness and transparency. I wish to thank the CPPA for presenting this request. Our new government is proud to have taken some important steps forward on this issue.

In the months ahead, Minister Day and I look forward to continuing to work with the CPPA as our government fulfills its priority of strengthening the justice system and creating the safer, more just Canada we all aspire to build.

Thank you.

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